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From Impasse to Operative

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To have such a brilliant and generous group of literary scholars respond to *Chimeras of Form* is a profound privilege. I am grateful to Colleen Lye, Gina Patnaik, Nicole Rizzuto, Jill Richards, and Matt Hart for essays that eloquently address my book's arguments. Each situates *Chimeras of Form: Modernist Internationalism Beyond Europe, 1914–2016* within differently illuminating critical conversations and introduces me to writers, scholars, and activists that enlarge my own sense of the literary history of internationalism. When they challenge or disagree with some of my claims, they never mischaracterize my positions. In fact, they help me to understand my argument in a new light and in terms of methodological and political commitments that overlap with mine even if they are not exactly mine. In a moment when rival factions are so dedicated to misrepresenting one another on behalf of their own interests, I cannot help but think that book forums, such as this one, exemplify and preserve an increasingly rare form of collegiality. Each response is a model of constructive engagement and represents the best of what an academic intellectual community has to offer. I do not say this lightly.

As I read through the responses, two pressing demands emerged. These are demands that go beyond *Chimeras of Form* as a single monograph and speak to larger currents in the fields of modernist and postcolonial study in an age of political despair. Together, the previous responses 1) call for the reevaluation of literary study in relationship to social movements and collective organizing on the left and 2) take stock of postcolonial studies' institutional space within the academy and its partial absorption into modernist studies and comparative literature. Neither of these demands can ever be fully addressed by my short response, but I believe that the forum as a whole will be important to scholars who share the concerns of its contributors.

I will start with the institutional legacy of postcolonial studies. Lye and Rizzuto both reference the postcolonial as a critical category, but have different assessments of the fate of the field. For Lye, postcolonial *theory* has been enormously successful in changing the way adjacent fields like modernism conduct research. For Rizzuto, postcolonial *studies* has paid an institutional price for its theories' influence on

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modernism, world literature, and comparative literature. Rizzuto is correct that, as an independent area of specialty, postcolonial literary study is contracting while modernist studies is expanding. One could look to the MLA Jobs Information List, book series at university presses, and recently published monographs to confirm the disparity. A recent roundtable edited by Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan, featuring several contributors fresh off the job market, takes stock of the feeling some postcolonialists have that the rug was swept out from under them. They went on the market as postcolonialists and came out as global Anglophonists.[1]

I think the contraction of postcolonial studies has been the consequence of university initiatives and hiring practices that prioritized "the global," but I feel equally that globalization has absorbed colonialism as the world-historical process of consequence. Of course, capitalism and empire are embedded in globalization, as I and others affiliated with postcolonial studies strongly argue. But postcolonialism itself is more powerful for the attendant vocabularies it has furnished than for the keyword *postcolonial* itself. When Lye wrote that the term *postcolonial* appears only once in my index, I immediately thought: "What?! Did I have a good indexer? Did I even know what a good index was when I okayed it?" But then I went back through *Chimeras of Form* and realized how much I used terminology indebted to postcolonial studies: "anticolonial," "deprovincializing," "Eurocentric," and various versions of "uneven comparison." Postcolonial theory shapes my understanding of modernity not as a European bequest to non-Europeans, but as a universalizing process in which colonial imposition created inequality and dispossession on the one hand and revelatory forms of uprising and critique on the other. Yet, territorial colonialism is only one phase of modernity and, in many regions, a faded one compared to various other empires of the law, mind, and finance, also known as international human rights law, cultural imperialism, and neoliberalism. I ultimately felt *internationalism* was the more precise word for generating a critique of these related, but distinct logics because my particular literary history did not follow the pattern of imperial oppression met by localized resistance. Rather, the writers and works I studied scrambled clear lines of power and privilege, flirted with quietude and militancy in equal measure, and generally walked the line of geopolitical analysis and political action. If they were revolutionaries, faithful to a cause, we'd be talking about utopias and future heavens, not chimeras.

Still, my schooling in postcolonial theory imbues my approach to modernist internationalism. So does my desire to reframe the historical failure of certain forms of political imagination. What retrospectively and even in our own time look like chimeras are actually opportunities to rethink the range of political possibility. Hence the utility of the chimera as an analytical alternative to utopia, a concept built on forward-thinking action. Patnaik could not be more right when she judges my readings as refusing "to valorize writers' skepticism of collectives as analytic acumen, opting instead to highlight how such resistance to belonging comes with its own risks." This is probably why I could not stop using the word *impasse* in my book! Richards, in turn, vitally reminds me that the range of the possible (or "conditions of possibility" as she writes) itself has a history and that scholars would be wise to articulate how

1 Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan, "Introduction: South Asia from Postcolonial to World Anglophone," *Interventions* 20.3 (2018): 309–16.

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historical circumstances make certain avenues seem more possible than others. I can only say: Yes. I don't know if *Chimeras of Form* consistently meets the call for a materialist accounting of literary and political imagination, but I am confident that the work of Patnaik and Richards will.

I take Rizzuto's point that there is another side of postcolonial studies, whose arguments I do not cite in my book, but that creep up in my parsing of modernist studies' expansion versus modernist studies' deprovincialization. I have written at more length about the scalability of global modernism in another forum (which, by the way, also features Rizzuto's incisive thoughts on the topic of "scale and form") so I will not rehearse that argument here.[2] Briefly, the scholarship, which Rizzuto cites in her response to my book, views modernist and postcolonial studies as competing fields with incompatible perspectives. Modernism's hostile takeover depoliticizes post-colonialism, reduces the space available to realist and regionally rooted works, and bears out an expansionist credo that unwittingly replicates Orientalist fantasies of epistemological dominance. I think that global modernism has not generally had good responses to the obscuration of regionalist work, and some scholarship in its name does serve Eurocentrism by employing diffusionist rather than deprovincialized paradigms. The turn to an expanded study of realisms and reevaluating the conjuncture of realism and modernism is probably the best way to redress at least one of Rizzuto's observations.[3] Any expanded paradigm of realism, however, if it were to become as institutionally successful as global modernism, will be open to similar criticisms with respect to exporting European literary paradigms.

Winning the war of influence then is probably the best indicator that a school of thought should be ready for a backlash. Postcolonial studies bears within it a strong opposition to institutionality, but its contraction comes upon the heels of its transformation of multiple disciplines and its spawning of some of the theory-era's brightest stars.[4] Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak revolutionized comparative literature in the heyday of postcolonial studies (though Said famously distanced himself from postcolonialism). Indeed, when postcolonial studies enjoyed its highest profile, it was the subject of hard-hitting critiques from within and without. They sounded uncannily like the critiques now levied against global modernism. Postcolonialism was charged with ahistoricism, a decontextualized aggregation of specific national histories, monolingualism when compared with area studies, and a metropolitan location that masked the power relations it claimed to undo.[5] The field's influence produced

2 Aarthi Vadde, "Scalability," *Modernism/Modernity* (PrintPlus, January 2, 2018). Available online at: https://doi.org/10.26597/mod.0035; Nicole Rizzuto, "Global Modernism at Sea: Maritime Labor and Surface Reading in Richard Hughes's *In Hazard*," *Modernism/Modernity* (PrintPlus, January 2, 2018). Available online at: https://doi.org/10.26597/mod.0040.

3 I'm thinking here of Joe Cleary, Jed Esty, and Colleen Lye, eds., "Peripheral Realisms," special issue of MLQ 73.3(2012).

4 Aarthi Vadde, "Guidance in Perplexity: Recasting Postcolonial Politics in J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*," *Ariel* 41.3–4 (2011): 231–47.

5 See, for example, Anne McClintock, "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-colonialism,'" *Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 84–98; Ella Shohat, "Notes on the 'Postcolonial,'" *Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 99–113; Arif Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism," *Critical Inquiry* 20 (1994): 328–56; Meenakshi Mukherjee and Harish Trivedi, eds., *Interrogating Post-colonialism* (Shimla, India: India Institute of Advanced Study, 1996).

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scrutiny of its location, theory, methods, and politics; however, its theories, methods, and politics remain indispensable to reconceiving modernity and countering the universality of European theory. Who knows if global modernism as a hiring category and autonomous specialty will last or what its legacy will be. The ebbs and flows of subfields are not organic; they have a history tied up in world-historical processes as much as university-wide initiatives and departmental priorities. Although I realize that field nomenclature is deeply important to the reproduction of knowledge and the training of doctoral candidates, I confirm Lye's sense that postcolonial theory has restructured the "canonical literary field" of modernism—in the way that I and many others approach it.

Now to the matter of reevaluating literary study in relationship to social movements and collective organizing on the left. This issue is the horizon beyond the institutional politics of postcolonial studies versus global modernism, the hiring categories of English and Literature departments, and the constant threat of demise facing programs in ethnic studies, critical race theory, and gender studies. Collective organizing is the nexus at which the academic life of literary critics meets the civic life of citizens of nation-states who are furious about what is being done in their names. Assuming I am right about the order of essays in this forum (prior to mine), it begins with Lye's catalog of horrors culled from the daily news and Hart's important recovery of Peter Petroff. Petroff dedicated himself to the socialist cause in Russia, Great Britain, and Germany. He organized for the revolution, and when it didn't come, continued battling to build socialist political parties and trade unions. Unflagging in his efforts, he is the figure who, in this forum anyway, exemplifies a political commitment that none of the writers featured in my book sustained for very long—if ever.

Through the prism of Petroff's work, Hart writes, "Vadde's focus in *Chimeras of Form* is not on politics as such but on the way political possibilities and impossibilities emerge as a kind of literariness." I wish I had written this sentence in my book because it so compactly gets at the contribution of literariness to political thought. In *Chimeras* I argued that literature makes a central, if perennially overlooked, contribution to the intellectual history of globalization. By intellectual history, I meant not a subdiscipline of history, but a humanistic project of understanding the arguments, beliefs, feelings, cultural norms, and political persuasions that develop in response to the integration of the world's economies. Hart's "politics as such" reaffirms the gap between theory and action with literariness on the one side and collective organizing on the other. These sides are not always mutually exclusive, for as Lauren Berlant and Ann Cvetkovich argue, feelings are profoundly political and, if harnessed by collective organizers, they can become the basis of political movements, radical think tanks, and rebuilt institutions.[6] That said, *writer-activist* remains a hyphenated term for a reason. Liberal or bourgeois conceptions of literariness consider some form of aesthetic autonomy essential to the concept.

6 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Ann Cvetkovich, "Public Feelings," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106.3 (2007): 459–68. Feel Tank Chicago is one example of an alternative kind of political organization, a play on the think tank that places feeling and aesthetic response at the center of political critique and activism.

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Lye sees the influence of Adorno in my work, but suggests that I deviate from him in identifying positives on the other side of dialectical negation. She further argues that my book turns readers' gazes toward "the concrete forms of impasses (i.e., literature) that are 'immanent to modernity.'" I had not thought of *Chimeras* in these terms before, but I find them exciting. Redefining literariness as a concrete form of impasse is something that greatly appeals to me. It gets away from the equation of literariness with autonomy either in the negative dialectical sense of Adorno or in the politically quiet sense once regularly attributed to modernist individualism. If we approach literature as a vital tool for the negotiation of political impasses, then it seems an essential dimension of any political movement. This is a complex form of instrumentality that should not be mistaken for literature as political propaganda.

Such an approach to the literary would not stop at a close reading of the text. It would have to take into account what Lye calls "reception contexts." Drawing on Juliana Spahr's work, Lye points out the interest, particularly among scholars of American literature, in the structural conditions of literary production, reception, and distribution. This sociological turn has minimized the importance of close reading and literary content, and that minimization has reinforced the conviction that literature has evolved into an insufficient medium for resistance to a neoliberal order. Many scholars of postcolonialism have been arguing this same point for a long time, which is why so many in the field have privileged cultural materialism over literary studies. My formalist approach, however, reasonably leads Lye to ask whether literature as an increasingly boutique medium can ever be a meaningful source of resistance or sanctuary for leftist thought.

In the wake of writing *Chimeras* and turning to a second book called (for now) *The Amateur Spirit: Contemporary Literature in the Sharing Economy*, I've found that studying reception contexts or more simply ordinary readers greatly alters the reputation of literature as an elitist pastime. Surely, how we define *literature* depends on what kind of literature we are studying—whether realism and modernism or pulp and popular fiction—and what kinds of readers we are studying—professional critics trained in specific methods or lay readers developing their own rules of engagement. Even beyond the high/low divide, my research into literary fandoms, blogs, and online creative writing communities shows me that reading and writing groups as well as blog comment spaces foment political anger and dissent.[7] These conversations, depending on the community, might be thoroughly engaged with avant-garde literature and feminist theory, commercial literature, or "shipping" characters from canonical literary fiction to act out racially progressive or queer fantasies of love. Such popular engagements with literature may not meet the standards of political action or resistance as such, but they represent organized energy and clear desires for another possible world.

Lest I sound too celebratory of popular communing over literature, especially in a moment when bots, trolls, and hackers swing elections, I will underline the material conditions propping up the digital literary sharing economies just listed. Digital

7 See Aarthi Vadde, "Amateur Creativity: Contemporary Literature and the Digital Publishing Scene," *New Literary History* 48.1 (2017): 27–51. Also, Melanie Micir and Aarthi Vadde, "Obliterature: Toward an Amateur Criticism," *Modernism/Modernity* 25.3 (2018): 517–49.

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platform ownership reveals the same if not more intensely monopolistic conditions than those Spahr attributes to the depoliticized contemporary literature complex. Indeed, the very adoption of the phrase "sharing economy" by Web 2.0 tech conglomerates is an example of how crowd-based social media companies like Facebook and Twitter tout democracy, cooperation, and global connection while hoarding data and retaining sole ownership over the means of production for user-generated content. That is why it is essential for a leftist literariness to encompass publishing and distribution practices into its self-definition. I think here of Walter Benjamin writing:

> Namely, instead of asking: what is the relationship of a work of art to the relationships of production of the time? Is it in accord with them, is it reactionary or does it strive to overthrow them, is it revolutionary?—in place of this question, or in any case before asking this question, I would like to propose another. Before I ask: how does a literary work stand in relation *to* the relationships of production of a period, I would like to ask: how does it stand *in* them? This question aims directly at the function that the work has within the literary relationships of production of a period. In other words, it aims directly at a work's literary *technique*.[8]

I take Benjamin to be replacing the question of a work's politics (reactionary, revolutionary, etc.) with the question of a work's capacity for social analysis via its techniques. This is a close approximation of what I was doing in *Chimeras of Form*. But then, Benjamin goes further and to Russian writer Sergei Tretiakov who exemplifies the "operative writer." The operative writer "actively intervenes" in political struggle and "defines his task through statements made about his activity."[9] Tretiakov yoked his novel-writing work in *Master of the Fields* to the actual organizing of agricultural collectives (convincing workers to join, raising money for tractors, creating newspapers as new organs of information).

Placing literature in the service of revolution, as Tretiakov did, leads Benjamin to historicize particular literary genres and expand the concept of literariness to include what we would today call nonliterary or informative genres like the newspaper: "Yet I chose the example of Tretiakov intentionally, to indicate the breadth of the horizon from which we should rethink our notion of literary forms or genres in line with the given techniques of our current situation, so that we may arrive at the forms of expression to which literary energies should be applied today."[10] For Benjamin, Tretiakov's newspaper is as literary as his novel. Benjamin's left literariness should not be mistaken for new historicism or cultural studies *avant la lettre*. Rather, it incorporates the mechanisms of publishing, funding, and distribution (Spahr's sociological foci) into the work of the operative writer. Such a perspective does not cede the literary to the bourgeois realm, but takes it back and adapts it to the socialist cause of liberating or redistributing the means of production.

8 Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," trans. John Heckman, *New Left Review* 62 (1970): 2.
9 Ibid., 3.
10 Ibid., 4.

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In *The Amateur Spirit*, I will be supplementing traditionally "literary" novels with a Benjaminian left-literary approach to blogs, Twitter fiction, newsfeeds, and crowdsourced and computationally produced literature. Most of the literary works I examine will not be written in direct service of a socialist revolution, but many will operate in ways that disrupt the business-as-usual models of corporate "Big Five" publishing and large digital self-publishing platforms. All will illuminate the need for a people's internet in which sharing content is tethered to collectives organizing their own means of production and distribution. The scramble for the internet is key to the making of contemporary literature the world over, but especially in postcolonial and developing nations where tech giants see new markets to conquer and their best chance for growth.

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